

## **YRBS Open-End Responses Report**

### **Introduction**

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was administered to Ottoson Middle School students on May 27, 2009. As an addendum to the survey, students were asked to provide comments about the survey, note the specific topics that are most important to address, and which topics should be added to the survey (complete question wording can be found in the appendix). These questions were included on a separate, single sheet of paper, and responding was optional. 222 6<sup>th</sup> graders, 148 7<sup>th</sup> graders, and 114 8<sup>th</sup> graders provided open-ended responses, and multiple responses were allowed. Results are expressed in percentages for comparison purposes.

The type and comprehensiveness of responses varied considerably. While some students answered the questions as written, many noted topics they felt the school should address, some voiced concern about certain topics and/or behaviors they see, and others expressed confusion about specific questions. A handful indicated they and their peers would not provide truthful responses for fear of getting in trouble or because the questions were too personal and invaded their privacy. In addition, in many instances, it was difficult to determine what specific question students were answering or information they were providing. Due to the variability of responses and potential for misconception, all data were pooled and interpreted as topics of concerns for students.

### **Summary**

Across grades, depression and violence/bullying are of great concern to students. General substance abuse is, by far, the topic of most concern to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. This topic receives more than triple the proportion of mentions among 8<sup>th</sup> graders than it does among 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Stress is also considerably more concerning to 8<sup>th</sup> graders than students in the other grades.

### **Detailed Results**

Below are the detailed results, organized by topic, and including only those topics with the highest proportion of mentions. The complete, raw data are in the appendix.

*Depression:* Depression is tied for the most mentions among 6<sup>th</sup> graders (18%), it received the most mentions among 7<sup>th</sup> graders (21%), and a moderate proportion of 8<sup>th</sup> graders (13%) are concerned about it. Students believe depression is very common, yet a taboo topic that is overlooked, ignored, and outright dismissed, making it a clear priority for them. Among students who mentioned depression, there is an understanding that depression affects other areas, such as violence and substance abuse, and that bullying can directly cause it.

"To get the 6th grade even more informed, they should talk to us about depression and how it can hurt everyone around you. Also, what you do when you are depressed and how it will affect your body physically and mentally." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think that depression is the most important topic to address. I think this because usually, schools do not really talk about depression with their students." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"We don't really learn much about depression, and we don't really know how to deal with it, and we can't really talk to anyone about it." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

"You have no idea how many kids are depressed." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think depression is very important because it can lead or come from almost all of the other topics." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

"Many kids in my school seem to slowly not want to play or hang out any more, and I think it is due to depression." 8<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think depression is important to talk about because we don't hear much about it. We talk about the other subjects in health class, but we never talk about depression." 8<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think depression is the most important. I say this because if someone is depressed, they might do drugs to get out of depression. Then they will use violence to get the drugs and get in trouble. Depression is just the start of the cycle." 8<sup>th</sup> grade male

"I think depression is the most important topic to address. Many people I know, including myself, have become depressed and even considered suicide due to bullying from others...If people are not taught how to cope with depression, there could be more drop outs and even deaths." 7<sup>th</sup> grade male

*Violence:* Violence received a high proportion of mentions across grades (6<sup>th</sup>: 18%, 7<sup>th</sup>: 18%, 8<sup>th</sup>: 17%). There is a clear concern for physical fights among boys, but the violence category most likely encompasses additional areas. Many violence mentions were quite general and included little, if any, explanation as to the type and extent of violence they intended to indicate, leaving this category open to interpretation.

"This school has a violence problem." 6<sup>th</sup> grade male

"Violence, b/c most substance abuse takes place in high school, while fights frequently happen at the middle school. The school should stop punishing people too harshly for small things like chewing gum and focus their attention on things actually matter, like violence." 7<sup>th</sup> grade male

"People in my school are always getting verbally and physically abused. On at least one day every week, there is a big fight that all the kids in my grade watch." 7<sup>th</sup> grade male

"I think violence is most important for you to address. Its happening so much at school now. It really has to stop." 7<sup>th</sup> grade male

I think physical fights should be addressed more. Several boys at our school have gotten in fights and brag about it. It seems like they fight to try to be cool, but it is kind of scary. I don't want anyone getting hurt or seriously injured." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

*Bullying:* A noteworthy proportion of students included bullying in their response, especially 6<sup>th</sup> graders (9%, 7<sup>th</sup>: 6%, 8<sup>th</sup>: 7%). The number of bullying mentions is potentially even higher, as many violence mentions refer directly to bullying as a form of violence. As with stress, explanations of bullying responses were also quite impassioned, including several personal stories and fears.

"The topic I think is most important is definitely violence. Violence is really important these days because there are a lot of people being bullied and if you taught us more about violence, then bullying would stop and we wouldn't have to worry about it." 6<sup>th</sup> grade male

"Teaching what to do [if you are being harassed] would be helpful to kids that get bullied on a regular basis." 6<sup>th</sup> grade male

"I would talk a little more about harassment and being bullied. What I've heard and been through is that people online are mean and they spread gossip and rumors so if they added a couple more questions about that, they could talk to the grades about it." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think that you should also think about teasing behind people's backs because it happens a lot, and even though it isn't as dangerous as fist fights, the way you feel about yourself takes longer to heal than a bruise does." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think we should focus on fitting in and violence in school. More about how students treat other students. Teach them that picking on people and making fun of others is not right." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

*Substance Abuse:* Substance abuse is by far the topic of most concern to 8<sup>th</sup> graders (38%), and of moderate concern for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders (11% each). However, 6<sup>th</sup> (16%) and 7<sup>th</sup> (14%) graders had substantially more specific mentions of drugs relative to 8<sup>th</sup> graders (6%). This potentially reflects a more sophisticated, broader understanding of substance abuse among 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Students provided few explanations as to why they are most concerned about this topic.

"I think substance abuse is very important because if you get hooked on drugs, every other aspect of your life will fall apart as well. If someone starts to do drugs, then they could become violent, depressed, and start having sex when they are high. Therefore, I think substance abuse is a very important issue, though they all matter." 8<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think that substance abuse and depression are the most important in my school. This is because I know people who smoke, I've heard of people drinking and doing drugs and there have been two kids in my grade who have been sent to an asylum for attempted suicide. I don't think this is right for an eighth grader, and I wish it wasn't so common." 8<sup>th</sup> grade female

*Stress:* Stress is somewhat important to 6<sup>th</sup> (8%) and 7<sup>th</sup> (7%) graders, but of clear concern for 8<sup>th</sup> graders (14%). As with depression, many students connected stress to other risky behaviors. Despite receiving fewer mentions than several other topics, the open-ended responses / explanations around stress were some of the most impassioned.

"I think a topic we should cover more is stress and how to deal with it because stress can lead to drug use and cutting/depression. A lot of people who are overstressed and don't know how to deal with it." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I believe for me stress is the most important because when I've been to school recently, it dominates me, and I'm constantly stressed about it. For me, this is by far the most important issue due to the fact that it ruins my life more than any substance ever has." 8<sup>th</sup> grade male

"I think it is important to ask about the stress level of some of the children, especially because in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, you are not used to the workload." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think a lot of people feel stressed and pressured ALL THE TIME because at school, we're trying so hard to do well. At home we have to keep our parents happy and we need to be happy for our friends. Also, so many kids hate life because they are too stressed. That normally leads to suicide, drug use, bullying, self-consciousness. We are so pushed to be the best. That is why people judge others so harshly, because they are so self-conscious themselves, they feel better by being mean to others. It gets really hard to avoid all the drugs and pressure. That's why so many kids give in. A way the school can help is just make sure we know that nobody can be perfect." 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think pressure and stress from teachers is very important. With all the subjects giving homework, projects, and tests, you can have about 7 things to do at home till late at night. That is basically having school for 5 more hours, giving you no time to relax. With all the teachers pushing you to do your best, you can feel a great deal of pressure." 6<sup>th</sup> grade male

"I think you should add stuff like how long it takes you to do your homework and more school stuff because that is what causes me to be stressed. Between homework and softball I barely have time to breathe." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think school in general should be added as a topic because kids get the most stressed out about all the different assignments they get at the same time." 8<sup>th</sup> grade female

*Nutrition and Fitness:* Physical fitness and nutrition are considerably more important to 6<sup>th</sup> graders (15% for fitness and 10% for nutrition) than the other grades (3-5% for both topics in each grade). As students move up to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, concerns for these topics are potentially replaced with greater concern for other topics, notably substance abuse and sex.

"I think the most important topic is body weight. A lot of kids our age don't watch what they eat and could become obese and get harmful diseases" 6<sup>th</sup> grade female

"I think you should address what soda can do to your body if you have too much of it." 7<sup>th</sup> grade female

*Sex:* Sex is of less concern than other topics overall. Very few 6<sup>th</sup> graders are concerned about sex (2%), and 9% of 7<sup>th</sup> graders and 7% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders mentioned it.

## **Recommendations**

*General:* Ottoson counselors and administrators should look into addressing depression and violence / bullying with all students on a regular basis. Although a core focus of current health education, substance abuse is of considerable concern to 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and Ottoson staff should consider adjusting the curriculum to better address students' concerns. Stress is also of increasing concern to 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and providing students with organizational and stress management skills – as early in middle school as possible – may help quell anxiety around it.

*Introduction Page:* Because students noted considerable concern regarding the truthfulness of survey responses, the introduction page should reinforce the survey is anonymous, that results are examined at the total level only (not individually), and that teachers and school officials will not see the results. Several students noted that the topic behaviors in the survey do not happen at their school, and consequently, the introduction should also mention that the behaviors covered in the survey may or may not be ones in

which they engage or that they have seen. In addition, some students did not understand all the questions and/or know the drug names, so the instructions should indicate that students should answer the questions to the best of their ability and if they don't understand a question, can skip it. Lastly, because some felt the question topics were too personal, explaining that it is important to capture personal behaviors to understand at a high level what students are doing as well as reiterating that it is anonymous, may help address this concern and improve the accuracy of responses.

*Question Phrasing and Set Up:* In future iterations of the open-ended questions, it may help clarify the intent of student responses if the questions are numbered and listed on separate lines. Students clearly have concerns and topics they would like to discuss. To capture these, in addition to asking for the most important topics and what to add to the survey, provide a clear space for general comments. Also, the questions should not list topics as example responses so as to fully avoid the potential for biasing results.

## **Appendix**

Question text: “We would appreciate any comments you have on the survey. Which specific topic of the survey, substance abuse, violence, depression, or other topic, do you think is most important for us to address? Should other topics be added? If so, which ones. Please explain your answer below. If you think more than one topic is important you may comment on several.”

## Raw Data

	6th Grade					7th Grade					8th Grade			
	Girls (n=112)	Boys (n=110)	Total (n=222)	222		Girls (n=95)	Boys (n=53)	Total (n=148)	148		Girls (n=59)	Boys (n=55)	Total (n=114)	114
Depression	18	22	40	18%		22	9	31	21%		7	8	15	13%
Stress	13	4	17	8%		8	2	10	7%		5	11	16	14%
Self-Esteem, Image	4	4	8	4%		5	0	5	3%		4	3	7	6%
Peer Pressure	3	0	3	1%		1	0	1	1%		1	0	1	1%
Suicide	2	2	4	2%		3	0	3	2%		2	0	2	2%
Sleep	2	2	4	2%		3	0	3	2%		0	4	4	4%
Violence	13	26	39	18%		13	13	26	18%		12	7	19	17%
Bullying	10	10	20	9%		5	4	9	6%		5	3	8	7%
Weapons / Safety	1	3	4	2%		0	0	0	0%		5	1	6	5%
Substance Abuse (general)	8	17	25	11%		12	5	17	11%		20	23	43	38%
Drugs	13	23	36	16%		12	8	20	14%		4	3	7	6%
Alcohol	3	12	15	7%		7	5	12	8%		6	5	11	10%
Tobacco	8	7	15	7%		4	0	4	3%		5	2	7	6%
Fitness / Physical Activity	17	16	33	15%		4	2	6	4%		2	3	5	4%
Nutrition / Healthy Eating	16	7	23	10%		5	3	8	5%		2	1	3	3%
Weight	2	3	5	2%		2	3	5	3%		1	0	1	1%
Sex	2	2	4	2%		7	7	14	9%		4	4	8	7%
HIV/AIDS	0	5	5	2%		1	0	1	1%		0	0	0	0%
Abuse (general)	6	1	7	3%		4	3	7	5%		1	0	1	1%
Screen Time	1	3	4	2%		1	0	1	1%		1	0	1	1%